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ABSTRACT

This paper describes fourth-year outcomes of the Brooklyn New School (BNS), a parent/staff-run alternative public elementary school located in Brooklyn, New York's Community School District #15. The BNS used a self-study process, in which an external researcher collected school data through document analysis, interviews, and participant observation. A draft of the evaluation was rewritten and edited by BNS faculty and staff. The school community goals were to: (1) provide a secure emotional and physical environment; (2) provide an academic curriculum that creates students who are able to face the challenges and problems of life; (3) provide a social curriculum where all are treated with trust and respect, and all value, appreciate, and utilize diversity; and (4) create a small democratic community center where all are equal partners in the learning process. The process offered suggestions for ways of thinking about school goals, provided a different lens on the structures and processes in place to meet those goals, validated existing and invented new school-assessment practices, and proved and improved the effectiveness of safeguards and incentives. In conclusion, self-studies, collaboratively undertaken by insiders and external friendly critics, can serve as starting points for discussion among all members of the school community, as accountability reports to the district and/or state, and as documentation of successful practices. (LMI)

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SCHOOL SELF-STUDIES: RESPECTING THE CONTEXT OF SCHOOLS

Jon Snyder

Paper Presented at the 1993 American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, Atlanta, Georgia

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The following comments are not a glorification of the researcher or even of the role of an external documentor in school improvement. The people who did the work described were the teachers, families, and students in the school. The credit (or blame) is fully theirs. They asked the documentors in. They asked the documentors to do certain things. They changed their practices. The work started with their agenda and that agenda was the hook that became the defining activity of the process.

THE PROCESS

The Brooklyn New School (BNS) is a parent/staff run alternative public elementary school within Community School District #15 in Brooklyn. Despite being "alternative," the per pupil expenditure for BNS is approximately the same as other elementary schools within the District. The 186 students (from 139 families) attending the school represent an ethnic diversity of one third Afro-American, one third Hispanic, and one third "other."

At the time of the work described, the school was located in the Red Hook neighborhood of Brooklyn. Red Hook is a primarily Afro-American community isolated from the "glamour" of Manhattan. Many neighborhood parents, for instance, were afraid to walk to the school in the dark of winter evenings and others feared for the safety of their children when classes took field trips to the local park. The school was physically located in a condemned annex of a large "traditional" elementary school -- four years into their existence, some windows were still boarded up. There were two "regular strength" toilets for the entire school. They could not handle the volume and literally students entered the bathroom mop in hand

The first three years of the school were a daily struggle for survival as the school within which they were embedded, the teacher's union, and

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especially the principal's union were opposed to their very existence. From their inception, they had planned to take a close look at their school: their original proposal to the board included an "evaluation" during their fourth year of existence. In addition, the District Board was requiring an evaluation (not a requirement for any other school in the District). The Board recommended that BNS hire the usual suspects, professional evaluators, to do a traditional evaluation. The school did not want this, feeling that a "non-traditional school requires a non-traditional form of assessment" and that "traditional assumptions might skew the analysis of our school." Therefore, rather than hire a professional evaluator, the parent-staff governing board of BNS asked the Center for Collaboration Education who asked NCREST who asked the author to work with the school to invent a "self-study process."

The author entered with a certain set of assumptions about the nature of accountability. They were:

1. Accountability begins with a set of commitments arising from the values and the goals of the school community;
2. The second component of accountability is the analysis of school structures and processes designed by the school to help it live up to its commitments -- looking at what the school actually does with children, staff, parents, and community;
3. The third component is feedback and assessment from as wide a variety of voices and mechanisms as possible to assess how closely the school is living up to its commitments;
4. The fourth component is the analysis of the safeguards and incentives that make it more likely the school will continually improve its chances of meeting its responsibilities to students, parents, staff, and the community.

In the self study model finally used, those components took the form of four questions:

o What are the school's goals for students, staff, and families? *(What do we value? What do we want for students, families, and staff?)*

o How does the school community go about trying to meet those

goals?
(How do we go about achieving our values? Given that schools provide educational opportunities but do not directly produce student learning, do the educational opportunities we provide increase the probability of desired outcomes?)

o How does the school know how close it is to meeting those goals? *(How do we know how well we are achieving what we want? What approaches to assessment do we use to gather such information? Are these approaches appropriately matched to our values and goals? Do these approaches give us information that helps us understand, improve, and explain what we do?)*

o What does the school do with the information thus gained? *(How do we change what we do over time as a result of our feedback? Given that the primary function of accountability is to take action to improve ourselves, how do we prove ourselves accountable?)*

The process itself was relatively straight forward. The two outside documentors began by talking with the school people and reading all the documents they could get their hands on. They then participated in a parent/staff meeting to try to come to a consensus on what the school's goals were. The school community eventually agreed that just about all of their goals for students and for their community could fit into the following four categories:

o Provide a secure emotional and physical environment;

o Provide an academic curriculum that creates students able to face the challenges and problems of life and who can realistically say, "I can do it;"

o Provide a social curriculum where <u>all</u> are treated with trust and respect and <u>all</u> value, appreciate, and utilize diversity;

o Create a small democratic community center where all are equal

partners in the learning process.

After the goals were agreed upon, the two non-school-based documentors observed classrooms, staff meetings, the play ground, staff and steering committee meetings, and school retreats. They spoke with everyone who would speak with them -- students, faculty and staff, parents, and people in the neighborhood. They reviewed documents, including student files, school and class newsletters, student work, etc.. The goal of all "research" was to understand the school's answers to how they went about meeting their goals, how they knew how they were doing, and what they did to improve.

After collecting the data over the course of three months, one of the documentors drafted a "report." It was definitely and purposefully "drafty," so that neither author nor school staff would be hesitant to cut it apart as need be. BNS faculty and staff then went over that draft with a fine tooth comb -- editing and rewriting and rethinking for several months. Their work resulted in a school evaluation report which BNS faculty and parents, and the author presented to the school board.

The BNS community felt the report was satisfactory, but that the process was of much greater value. Both school and documenting participants believe the major value of the self-study process was that it made school practices more visible and thus more open to adjustment. Specifically, the process:

- o offered suggestions for ways of thinking about school goals;
- o provided a different lens on the structures and processes in place to meet those goals;
- o validated the myriad manners in which the school knew how it was doing and helped them invent new ways;
- o proved and improved the presence and effectiveness of safeguards and incentives that increased the possibility of constructive practices, decreased the possibility of destructive practices and insured that the school acted upon its knowledge and concern in a professional manner.

A STORY

At the time of the process described above, BNS heard not only that they had won the battle for survival but that they would be moving to a new physical location. They would exist and in a building that had bathrooms. They could have broken their arms patting themselves on the back, but they did not. They were concerned about the children of Red Hook, about the Red Hook community they had called home for four years, and about the effect upon the school of possibly losing an essential ingredient of what had made it a special place.

What school structures and processes were in place for them to "hear" their concerns?

The director's office served as a safety zone for students and teachers who felt themselves edging towards behaviors they would rather avoid. It was not a place where people (adults or children) went when they were "in trouble" but was rather a pro-active place for quiet time, a pat on the back, or advice on how to handle frustration. After news of the move was shared, Director Mary Ellen Bosch noticed that Red Hook children were needing that support more than they ever had in the past.

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A more academic example is the comparison the staff did of classroom based observation and analysis of actual reading behaviours and standardized reading test results. As part of their daily teaching and assessing strategies, teachers collected and recorded their observations concerning the books that children were reading, when, and at what level of difficulty and understanding. As part of this self-study, the documentors compared the books the children were actually reading with test indicators of what those children were capable of reading. There was a high congruence between classroom and test assessment data for those students who scored well on the exam (the 75th percentile or better). As test scores decreased, however, the gap widened between a child's observed work and test score. To give a sense of the magnitude of the gap, it was not unusual for test evidence to place a child in the 10th to 20th percentile range while classroom evidence placed that same child in the 60th to 70th percentile. This is the difference between qualifying for a

remedial and/or special education program and being significantly above average in a regular classroom. The cold reality for some Red Hook children then was that if they went to a "traditional" school where one's school experience may be largely determined by test results, they would be labeled as learning disabled and have their access to educational opportunities severely limited when in fact, it is the assessment system, not the children, which is disabled (For complete study, see Snyder, Chittenden, and Ellington, 1993. *Assessment of Children's Reading: A Comparison of Sources of Evidence.* New York: NCREST.)

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At a retreat, the school community was discussing how Red Hook families could be enticed to remain members of the school. A Red Hook parent, visibly uncomfortable in the surroundings and unfamiliar with the group processes which have structured the retreat, overcame her reticence and spoke with unmasked emotion: "What's going to get parents is that their kid will be treated with respect. And that is going to change him -- and you."

* * * * *

At a parent/staff steering committee meeting, an Hispanic parent member said:

> We want to invent a culture of integrated learning. We have to maintain the notion of struggling worth in this school. Everyone is not the same, but we are trying to learn to respect and understand differences. It is a constant battle, but the experience of the battle is worthwhile educationally. It raises such issues as what is authority? How is it established? How do racial issues manifest themselves in classrooms? ...
> Each classroom at BNS is an experiment with the impossible. We have to make certain the real issues come up. We have to articulate the anger. We have won certain battles. ... We have lost others. The important thing is to have the battles.

What did they about this information? How did they make sure "to have the battles inherent in learning to respect and understand differences?

School staff took advantage of the "bus stop network," hanging out with family members as they waited with their children for the bus to arrive to take them to school.

* * * * *

That June at all the street fairs, in the shopping areas, and in community gathering spots, teams of Red Hook families and school staff set up booths and talked about BNS.

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For several years BNS had been involved in a process clarifying their goals and objectives for students. The work had bogged down in the paradoxical task of creating high standards without ultimately self-defeating standardization. With the concerns arising from moving out of Red Hook, the staff brought an increased commitment to taking on curriculum standards. They felt that explicit statements concerning the rules of the game (e.g., what are the school's academic and social expectations) were exceedingly important for students and parents from cultures and classes outside the traditional power groups who make the rules. If one third of the school knows the rules of the game and the other two thirds do not, the school game is hardly fair. If, as a result, the same one third always wins, the development of respect, appreciation, and utilization of diversity will be seriously impeded.

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The result of these efforts was that the following fall, in the new site a threatening and difficult bus ride away, every family previously enrolled at BNS remained in the school and additional families from Red Hook began attending. The happy ending has one caveat: Now the school has to figure out a way for the bus system to show the same kind of trust and respect for Red Hook families as they do.

CONCLUSION

Self-studies, collaboratively undertaken by insiders and external friendly critics can serve several purposes. They can be used as:

- o starting points for discussion among all members of the school community;
- o accountability reports to the district and/or state;
- o documentation of successful practices which can be distributed to other schools, policy makers, politicians, and the research community.

The connection between successful school practices and the wider educational community is of great significance, particularly in terms of policy and political implications. While many schools are now accepting the daunting challenge of holding themselves responsible for the students, families, and staff in their care, policy people need to tap into the knowledge generated by schools in order to live up to their legal and ethical responsibilities to provide safe, nurturing, educational environments for all children.